Psychological Research and Intervention

Are you struggling? You need counselling:
The growing trend of mental health content on Instagram

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Article Info	Abstract
	Digital mental health platforms have become prominent in offering alternative mental health services and disseminating mental health-related content through social media, particularly Instagram. While some studies highlight the potential of such content to enhance mental health awareness, others underscore the risks associated with misinterpretation and self-diagnosis. This study employs content analysis to identify and categorize themes within mental health-related content from digital platforms on Instagram. Six content categories emerged, with romantic and family relationships being the most prevalent, followed by life challenges and psychological disorders, recovery and self-love, social media engagement, psychological education, and work and social relationships. Ethical concerns are raised regarding the promotional strategies of these platforms, as well as the inconsistency of psychological educational content, which often lacks a robust scientific foundation, rendering it susceptible to misinterpretation and self-diagnosis. Future research should delve deeper into these ethical concerns and the reliability of content, alongside examining follower engagement to provide a more comprehensive understanding of mental health content trends on Instagram. ***Keywords:*** *Digital Mental Health Platform, Mental Health-Related Content, Trend, Social Media, Instagram*

Introduction

Digital mental health platforms have increasingly emerged, particularly following the Covid-19 pandemic (Ben-Zeev, 2020). These digital platforms have become feasible alternatives to traditional face-to-face mental health services, which were difficult to access during periods of social distancing (Seabrook & Nedeljkovic, 2021). However, the rise of digital mental health platforms precedes the Covid-19 outbreak. These platforms were developed as an effort to reach more individuals who need psychological services but are constrained by distance and time. Additionally, digital mental health platforms are considered promising due to their relative efficiency and lower costs (Bucci et al., 2019). Moreover, online psychological services have been proven effective. A study by Sosialita (2023) demonstrated that online counseling can improve the mental health of adolescents. Furthermore, a systematic review by Balcombe & De Leo (2023) indicated that digital interventions are effective in treating anxiety and depression.

In addition to providing psychological interventions, these platforms also offer mental health-related content through their social media accounts. On Instagram, many digital mental health platforms offer consultation services, training, and actively upload mental health content in the form of images and videos. The variety of information formats contributes to Instagram being one of the most popular social media platforms in Indonesia. According to statistics from NapoleonCat (2024), as of January 2024, there are 89,891,300 Instagram users in Indonesia (31.8% of the population), with the largest user group being those aged 25 to 34 years (35,800,000 users), followed by those aged 18 to 24 years (29,500,000 users). It is assumed that many young people consume content on Instagram, including mental health content.

Constructivist theory posits that individuals learn, build knowledge, and create meaning through interaction with their environment. Therefore, social media plays a role in shaping knowledge—especially among young people who use it (Schrader, 2015). In this context, social media shapes individuals' perceptions of mental health, particularly among young people who constitute the majority of Instagram users. Furthermore, based on the media effects theory by Valkenburg et al. (2016), media can impact changes within individuals, groups, or society. Media effects can occur under certain conditions, distinguished according to paradigms relevant to understanding the effects of social media use: the selective, transactional, and conditional paradigms. The selective paradigm posits that individuals can consume only a limited amount of information and will choose based on certain dispositions, needs, and desires. Variations in cognitive and psychosocial aspects can influence how individuals use media and filter information. The transactional paradigm suggests that media is an outcome reflecting users' needs, moods, and attitudes. Additionally, the reciprocal psychological effects of selected messages further support media use. Finally, the conditional paradigm asserts that media effects may not apply uniformly to all users, with effects influenced by factors such as disposition, development, and social context (Valkenburg, 2022). When linked to mental health content on Instagram, its emergence may reflect users' needs or attitudes toward mental health. On the other hand, the content also provides information that shapes knowledge and reinforces users' attitudes toward mental health.

There has been limited research on mental health content produced by Instagram accounts of online mental health platforms, but the studies that have been conducted are noteworthy. Studies have shown that mental health content influences resilience among Instagram followers (Ramadhanty & Tsuroyya, 2023) and fosters positive attitudes toward mental health (Puspitasari et al., 2023; Arindita & Nasucha, 2023). Conversely, a study by Aryshinta et al. (2023) on interpersonal communication from mental health platforms to followers concluded that there are differences in how followers interpret the information conveyed in mental health content. This finding is intriguing because, alongside the benefits associated with such content, followers as recipients of information also have varied interpretations; thus, the information conveyed in the

content may align with the content creator's intended message, but may also be perceived differently by followers. For instance, according to a study by Gobel et al. (2023) not all mental health content on social media can be justified as evidence-based. Although such content can raise awareness about mental health, some content may lead to misunderstandings and increase the risk of self-diagnosis.

Exploring the themes of mental health content on Instagram is crucial. As more content emerges in line with the growing public awareness of mental health, not all of it necessarily provides valid information. Additionally, differing perceptions may lead to misunderstandings and misinformation, potentially exacerbating mental health issues. Therefore, this study aims to answer the following question: What are the characteristics of mental health-related content on Instagram?

Method

This study employs a qualitative approach using content analysis methodology. Content analysis involves the subjective interpretation of text data through a systematic coding process to identify themes or patterns (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This method allows researchers to understand social reality through a scientific approach subjectively (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). This study used conventional content analysis, where categories in the coding process are derived inductively directly from the raw data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

The researcher observed content created by four digital mental health platform accounts on Instagram: @riliv, @get.kalm, @ibunda.id, and @pijarpsikologi. These accounts are among the most followed, with @ibunda.id having the largest following (579,000 followers), followed by @riliv (415,000 followers), @pijarpsikologi (252,000 followers), and @get.kalm (138,000 followers). These accounts also actively share educational content about mental health.

Data were collected in the form of content produced by these four accounts between January and June 2024. The content formats collected include carousels (one post with multiple slides), single posts (one slide), and reels (short videos). The researcher conducted a content analysis following Zhang & Wildemuth (2009) which involves data collection from the four digital mental health platform accounts, determining the unit of analysis as the themes in each content piece, developing categories and coding schemes based on the gathered themes, testing the coding scheme, performing the coding, and then checking and drawing conclusions.

Result and Discussion

Result

Data were collected in the form of content from the Instagram accounts @riliv, @get.kalm, @ibunda.id, and @pijarpsikologi over six months from January to June 2024. A total of 1,131 pieces of content were gathered, with the following breakdown as seen in Table 1. Subsequently, the researcher coded all the data from the four digital mental health platform accounts mentioned above, analyzing one account at a time until all data and units of analysis were successfully categorized. After consistency checks were performed, the researcher identified and summarized the themes and categories that emerged from the mental health-related content of the digital mental health platform accounts on Instagram. The identified themes and categories are as follows.

Table 1. Content Distribution for Each Platform

Platform	Content
@get.kalm	389
@ibunda.id	386
@riliv	346
@pijarpsikologi	10
Total	1,131

Table 2. Themes and Category of Mental Health-Related Content

Theme(s)	Category	Percentage (%)
Emotions, anxiety, depression, self-harm, trauma, overthinking, insecurity, bad habits, loneliness, complaints, ADHD, bipolar disorder	Life problems and psychological disorders	28.3
Marriage, love, infidelity, domestic violence, broken home, family, parenting, gender differences, and toxic relationships	Family and romantic relationships	34.2
Psychological terms, professional boundaries	Psychological knowledge	6.8
Work, toxic society/toxic culture, stigma/judgment	Work and social relationships	4.3
Healing, self-love, self-improvement	Recovery and self-love	14
Advertisements, questions/surveys, quotes, jokes	Social media engagement	12.4

Based on Table 2, it can be observed that there are six categories of mental health content created by digital mental health platform accounts on Instagram. The most dominant content category is romantic and family relationships, followed by life problems and psychological disorders, recovery and self-love, social media engagement, psychological knowledge, and finally, work and social relationships as the smallest category. The descriptions of these content categories are detailed as follows:

1. Family and Romantic Relationships

This category dominates the content created by digital mental health platform accounts on Instagram. The content in this category frequently discusses marriage and preparations for marriage, romantic issues (including love languages), infidelity and domestic violence, toxic relationships (including red flags in potential or current partners and intolerable behaviors in relationships), experiences of children in broken homes, family problems and dynamics (both with parents and with siblings or relatives), and parenting (particularly problematic parenting styles that cause suffering in children, as well as the differences between the firstborn, middle child, and youngest child). Additionally, themes of gender differences in romantic and family relationships (such as differing habits or needs of men and women towards their partners, the roles of men and women in the family, myths and stereotypes related to gender in society, and characteristics of men or women deemed suitable as partners) are also commonly found.

The theme of infidelity appears to be triggered by trending news. For example, following the news of infidelity involving a social media influencer at the end of 2023, the theme of infidelity began to appear in early January 2024. This theme consistently appeared every month until June 2024, coinciding with the viral cases of celebrity infidelities throughout mid-2024.

2. Life Problems and Psychological Disorders

Content in this category revolves around emotions, anxiety, depression, self-harm, trauma, overthinking, insecurity, bad habits, loneliness, complaints, ADHD, and bipolar disorder. These posts offer reflections on the experiences and grievances of individuals dealing with psychological disorders, such as the difficulty of bottling up emotions, the feelings and thoughts of those experiencing depression, the challenges of living with ADHD, the thoughts of someone with insecurity, the struggles of being an overthinker, and the sadness experienced by those who engage in self-harm.

3. Recovery and Self-Love

This category includes content focused on the process of healing, self-love, and self-improvement. Content on healing typically discusses the complexities of the healing journey, the time required for healing, the steps needed to recover from emotional wounds (such as acceptance and forgiveness), and signs that one has healed. Many healing-themed posts also address self-love, such as the importance of accepting and forgiving oneself. Self-love content, often related to healing, emphasizes the importance of prioritizing oneself, the necessity of making oneself happy instead of constantly trying to please others, and the validity of all emotions felt by followers. These posts also convey that everyone needs help, has their own problems, and therefore should not compare their suffering to others. Additionally, self-love content encourages followers to appreciate their achievements, stop comparing themselves to others, and value their bodies by resting.

4. Social Media Engagement

This category includes advertisements for consultations and training, promotions or discounts on counseling, humorous content or jokes, positive affirmations or motivational quotes, and questions or quizzes posed to followers. Advertisements are often embedded within other content that shares the same theme as the product or service being advertised. For example, in a carousel post about romantic relationship issues, the final slide may contain an ad for premarital counseling, couples counseling, or training on building healthy relationships. Another example is an ad for a makeup class to boost self-confidence, included in a post about physical bullying. A particularly interesting advertisement was an offer for a free counseling voucher, provided followers posted a testimonial about their experience using the digital consultation service offered by the platform. The platform would then select the best post, and the winner would receive the counseling voucher.

5. Psychological Knowledge

Content in this category consists of pure educational posts that are not necessarily related to trending news or frequently discussed phenomena. Examples include educational content on psychological terms covering various types of mental disorders such as narcissistic personality disorder, dissociative identity disorder, panic attacks, and dissociative amnesia. There are also educational posts about phobias, even though some of these terms are not officially listed in standard diagnostic guides like the DSM-V, such as philophobia (defined as the fear of falling in love), autophobia (fear of being alone), gamophobia (fear of commitment/marriage), and cherophobia (fear of happiness). Beyond

phobias, there are also educational posts about terms or symptoms reflecting mental health issues that are not officially recognized in the DSM-V and have not been extensively researched scientifically, including duck syndrome, people-pleasing, cute aggression, revenge bedtime procrastination, maladaptive daydreaming, victim mentality, oversharing/overexplaining, athazagoraphobia, smiling depression, Peter Pan syndrome, good girl syndrome, savior complex, toxic positivity, and highway hypnosis. However, some posts do cover psychological terms with a scientific basis, such as passive-aggressive behavior, catastrophizing thinking, emotional displacement, burnout, the function of the amygdala, the link between sugar consumption and ADHD, avoidant attachment, and the connection between coffee consumption and anxiety.

This category also includes educational content on professional boundaries in mental health, such as the differences between psychologists and psychiatrists, the roles and capacities of psychologists, the distinctions between family therapy and couple counseling, the provision of diagnoses, and even content discussing unprofessional behavior by psychologists. Many followers responded or commented on these posts, sharing their negative experiences during counseling, which caused them to doubt whether to consult a psychologist again.

6. Work and Social Relationships
      The final category, which has the smallest percentage compared to the others, pertains to work and social relationships within the community. Examples of content in this category include discussions on heavy workloads and relationships and conflicts with colleagues. Additionally, this category features content reflecting unhealthy relational patterns or toxic behaviors normalized in friendships or society, such as people overly interfering in personal matters and jokes considered common but are actually hurtful and constitute bullying. An interesting point is the appearance of content discussing inappropriate questions during the Eid holiday (Lebaran) that could anger or hurt others, or conversely, examples of appropriate questions to ask during Eid. There is also a lot of content addressing toxic comments during holidays, along with tips on how to handle hurtful comments and the habit of comparing achievements when gathering with extended family.

Discussion

The predominant content on digital mental health platforms on Instagram, which frequently addresses daily struggles such as romantic issues, family problems, psychological concerns, and challenges in the workplace and environment, may reflect the realities experienced by society, particularly the younger demographic that utilizes Instagram. According to data from NapoleonCat (2024), the majority of Instagram users are aged 25-34 and 18-24 years. Individuals within these age ranges are likely to be pursuing education, working, or engaging in romantic relationships or marriage. From a transactional paradigm, social media reflects the needs, moods, and attitudes of its users (Valkenburg, 2022). Content that mirrors the struggles of followers encourages them to selectively consume and engage with such content, as it is perceived to validate their experiences. Reciprocally, real-life experiences drive the creation of content that resonates with these followers, and content that is perceived as representative and fulfilling the needs of followers tends to receive more engagement (e.g., comments, shared grievances, and similar experiences), ultimately leading to its increased production.

The frequently appearing content can shape followers' perceptions of mental health. In this study, content related to relationships (romantic, familial, and social), mental disorders, and psychological terms can influence followers' perceptions of these issues. Negative themes within

the categories of family and romantic relationships, such as infidelity, domestic violence, broken homes, and toxic relationships, may lead followers to perceive romantic and familial relationships as inherently problematic and distressing. Similarly, themes within the categories of work and social relationships, such as toxic society/toxic culture and social stigma, can shape followers' thoughts regarding environmental or cultural norms that are perceived as toxic. This aligns with Schrader's (2015) assertion that social media plays a role in shaping knowledge, particularly among young users.

Despite the dominance of daily struggle themes, content focused on recovery, self-love, and psychological education, including the explanation of psychological terms and professional boundaries (such as the roles of mental health professionals like psychologists and psychiatrists), somewhat balances this negativity. Unfortunately, some of this content provides education on terms or labels that lack a strong scientific foundation. Although the primary goal is to raise awareness, such content has the potential to lead to misinterpretations and the risk of self-diagnosis (Gobel et al., 2023), thereby becoming counterproductive and contradictory to the intended function of digital mental health platforms.

In addition to connecting with followers through content related to daily struggles, digital mental health platforms also attempt to market their services through social media engagement content, including advertisements for counseling and training services embedded in content about romantic, familial, work, and social issues. These counseling and training service advertisements appear to be the ultimate solution to the problems followers face. However, information alone may not suffice, and followers may require services that allow them to directly interact with professionals. On the other hand, an intriguing finding is the impression that counseling services are being "promoted" by requiring followers/service users to act as marketers by providing testimonials about their experiences with the digital mental health platform. This raises concerns as providing testimonials, even when accompanied by a "reward" such as a free counseling session, involves issues of privacy and client confidentiality. The Indonesian Psychological Association's Code of Ethics (Himpsi) (2010) does not explicitly address the provision of testimonials, but it emphasizes the need to avoid conflicts of interest (Article 17) and the importance of protecting client privacy (Article 21). In contrast, the use of client testimonials is prohibited in the American Psychological Association's Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (APA) (2017), specifically in Section 5.05, which states, "*Psychologists do not solicit testimonials from current therapy clients/patients or other persons who because of their particular circumstances are vulnerable to undue influence.*" In light of this finding, the rules regarding the use of client testimonials may need to be clarified, particularly in the context of digital mental health services.

Conclusion

Mental health content produced by digital mental health platforms may reflect the real-life needs and challenges faced by their followers, primarily encompassing romantic relationships, family dynamics, psychological disorders, and the processes of recovery and self-love. In addition to presenting various life issues that resonate with followers, digital mental health platforms also provide education on self-recovery processes, supplemented by tools such as counseling services that can assist followers in navigating their life challenges. However, ethical concerns arise regarding how these digital mental health platforms promote their services. Furthermore, the educational content related to psychology appears to lack consistent grounding in strong scientific evidence, making it vulnerable to misinterpretation and self-diagnosis.

Suggestions

This study is limited to examining trends in mental health content from digital mental health platform accounts on Instagram. Future research could involve a more in-depth exploration of the issues identified, such as ethical concerns in advertising and the reliability of content that lacks a strong scientific foundation. Additionally, analyzing aspects beyond content, such as the nature of follower interaction or engagement with the content, could be pursued to gain a richer and more comprehensive understanding of mental health content trends on Instagram.

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